

Environment and Religious Practices of the Rajbanshis Living in a Border Village of Darjeeling District in North Bengal

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Almost all the primitive religions, nature and its product have been given proper respect in some way or the other. It has been seen that there were ways through which nature was protected. In Greek writings, there is a reference of Ge or Gaia as the Goddess of the earth – the founder figure of natural replenishment. In Vedic (Hindu) religion also, the earth was regarded as goddess with other elements (air, water, fire) of nature (Rawat, 2013).’According to historian Lynn White Jr (1967), it is Western Christianity that is responsible for destroying the ecological balance and endangering the life of human beings. He wrote, ‘the whole concept of sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West. For nearly two million Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature.’It is established fact that the Rajbanshis is one of the aboriginal people of North Bengal. The Rajbanshis like other peoples had and have some religious practices which are directly or indirectly related to the environment. But the study on the relation between environment and religious practices of the Rajbanshis living in North Bengal is very rare. Not a single study is found on this issue. The academicians were very silent in this matter. From this point of view, this study has been taken. This study may fill-up the gap of knowledge about the problem. This paper is an outcome based on primary data collected from Indo-Nepal border areas mainly. The data were collected by using interviews, observation, and case study methods mainly. Some information and data had been collected from some books, journal and census reports also. It is found that the environment and the religious practices of the Rajbanshis positively related. The religious practices of the Rajbanshis are helpful to conserve the environmental balance.

II

The Rajbanshis in History

It is found that “the history of the origin of the Rajbanshis is a mythical fact. It is said that they belong to the Bodo family that entered India in the 10th century B.C. from the East, settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra, and gradually spread over Assam and the whole of the North –Eastern part of India, particularly in North Bengal, present Bangladesh (Rangpur, East Dinajpur, North -Western part of Mymensing district), Lower Bhutan, Assam (Goalpara, Dhubri, Northern part of Kamrup and western part of Naogaon district), Meghalaya, Nepal (Bhadrapur and Jhapa, Morang districts), Eastern part of Purnea district of Bihar, some parts of Tripura (Adhikary, 2010). The 1921 Census Report shows about 89% of this caste population lived in these districts i.e. Dinajpur, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar. They were the original inhabitants of northern part

of West Bengal and the third largest Hindu Caste in the whole province (Adhikary, 2010).

III

Religious Practices of the Rajbanshis

Religious structure of the Rajbanshis is manifested by the observance of several festivals and puja of several gods and goddesses. In this connection Sanyal (1965) mentioned several gods and goddesses. These are *BaruniSinan*, *Bhandani Puja*, *Bisua*, *Bisuba*, *Charak puja*, *Dharam Thakur Puja*, *Dham*, *Dhan Kata puja*, *Devi Puja*, *Gorakhanath Puja*, *HudumDeo Puja*, *Jaganath Puja*, *Jitua Puja*, *Kali Puja*, *Lokhi Puja*, *Madam KamPuja*, *Mecheni Puja*, *Monasa Puja*, *NayaKhawa*, *Othai-Pothai Puja*, *Royagara puja*, *Satya Narayan Puja*, *Shiva Ratri*, *Silua*, and *UtthanEkadoshi*. The Rajbanshis living in ChhotoDilsaramJote show their respect to almost all the above mentioned gods and goddesses. Some of the important festivals observed by the Rajbanshis and some of the gods and goddesses believed by them are discussed here.

Ashari -Ghasari

The festival of *Ashari-Ghasari* falls in the month of June or Ashar in Hindu calendar. Here, the *Ashari-Ghasari* is an agricultural goddess. It has no idol. The goddess is symbolized by a banana plant, jute plant and arum. The festival is observed at the beginning of agricultural activity when land is prepared for paddy plantation. At the time of worship of the goddess *Ashari-Ghasari*, some other gods and goddesses are also worshipped. They worship *Kali*, *Mahadeva*, *Chaitanya or Nityananda* (household gods), *Bishahari* etc. The goddess *Ashari-Ghasari* is worshipped in a corner of a prepared land for paddy plantation. Here, a banana plant with jute plant, arum and some paddy saplings are placed in the corner and vermilion is pasted on the body of the plants and saplings. Special food items like banana, milk, khai (fried rice), chira (flat rice) with incense stick are also put in the corner. The goddess is worshipped by the male head mainly. The land holding Rajbanshi families living in the villages observe the festival.

Bisua, Bisuba

On the last day of the month of Chaitra (March – April) a spring hunt is arranged by the Rajbanshis. It is called *Bisua* or *Bisuba*. During the whole month of Chaitra the Rajbanshis eat or drink decoction of some bitters (e.g. *Brihati*, *Basak* (*AdhatodaVasica*) etc. On the last day of Chaitra none eat rice. They eat fries *BhadzaBhudza* (fries) which contains *chura* (flattened rice) curds, fried dal (lentils), while eating fries it is a custom to spit out the first morsel without swallowing it. This means that an enemy is to be killed. On the *Bisua* day some able bodied Rajbanshi males especially some young boys go out for a hunt with any weapon, bamboo pole, spear, sword, *Katari*, etc. They must kill an edible animal and eat its meat either roasted or cooked in the forest area. If they fail to kill an animal the Rajbanshis believe that the coming year would be bad. In the same night of the hunt a Gram puja is held. The *Mahadev*, the presiding deity of the village residing in the nearby bamboo groove on a hut is worshipped in order to drive away evil

spirit that may cause disease in the village and bless the villagers with good crop in the field. No woman is allowed to attend this ceremony.

Biswakarma

Belief on *Biswakarma* is not new to the Rajbanshis but the importance on the puja is not given equally by all the Rajbanshis. All the families of the Rajbanshis living in the villages do not worship the god *Biswakarma* at a same time. It is said that *Biswakarma* is worshipped as a creator of instruments. Here the cultivating families worship the god to keep their agricultural implements well during whole year. Most of the Rajbanshi families worship it during the Durga puja. They wash their plough, yoke, some other iron and bamboo made implements. They use vermilion on those washed implements. The male members mainly the head of a family with the help of an *Odhikari*(i.e. local Rajbanshi priest) worship the god. These villagers believe that if the god *Biswakarma* is pleased, they will continue agricultural activities successfully whole year and will produce enough. Very few Rajbanshis living in these villages under study worship the god in the month of September or Ashwin in Hindu calendar. They are the Rickshaw pullers. They worship the god to keep the rickshaws very well and to earn expectantly. On the day of puja a special item of foods made by banana, curd or milk, *khai* (fried paddy); *chira* (flattened rice) is offered to the god. Nobody is invited for this puja. But the children of most of the families come and take the special food items and enjoy it.

Buraburi

The Rajbanshis living in these villages believe on the goddess *Buraburi*. This goddess is worshipped by the Rajbanshis mainly. They worship the goddess for the wellbeing of new born baby. The goddess is worshipped within few months after the birth of the baby. The goddess has not particular idol. During the puja, a small part of courtyard is used for this purpose. It is covered by temporary tent made by bamboo and jute sticks within the boundary of the house. A *Deosi*(i.e. a local Rajbanshi priest) is needed to worship it. On the day of Puja, the parents of the new-born baby remain starved before the puja is over. At the time of puja, a full bunch of banana with other food items like *Khai* (fried paddy) *chura* (flattened rice), sugar etc. are offered. The sacrifice of pigeon and male goat is done. The *Deosi*worships the goddess performing many activities. He takes the baby in his lap and dances in the courtyard. Finally, he in the name of the goddess blesses the baby. At the end of the puja the *Deosi* requires a new saree for him by the name of the goddess. It is stated that the wellbeing of the new baby depends on the happiness of the goddess. In this puja, the *Deosi* is assisted by a drum-beating. Not a single person is invited for the occasion, but after starting of drum-beating, many villagers like children, women and others come and enjoy the occasion.

ChorokPuja

In the month of *Chaitra*(March-April) the puja of *Mahadeva* is performed in an open field. Gomira songs are sung and subscriptions rose from every house. Men dressed as Hara and Parvati and Yoginis sing and dance with music of *dhol* and *Kansi*.The villagers normally go to Batasi market to enjoy the *Chorok* Puja. This puja is arranged by a puja

committee. This committee collects subscriptions from the local peoples of all the communities living in nearby villages.

DhanKataPuja

This is the first paddy-cutting ceremony generally held on the first day of *Agrahayan* (Nov. – Dec.). When the paddy is ripe in the field, the *Githani*, the wife of the owner of the field takes an earthenware lamp, a scythe, a little vermilion on a plantain leaf and goes to the field. She cuts a few ears of the paddy, sprinkles some vermilion on them, moves the lamp in front of the cut ears several times and comes back with the paddy branches and fixes them over the doorway of the sleeping hut. After this ceremony, regular harvesting of paddy begins. The sheaves are kept in the field for two days and then brought home and stacked on the *Kholan*, the thrashing floor in the outer yard of the house. After reaping the winter paddy, there is *KhetUttam* puja where a cow or buffalo horn is mounted on a stick. The pointed end of the stick is driven into earth. The other end holding the horn remains above. The horn is covered with paddy straw tied to the horn. The structure is allowed to remain in the field.

Dharam Thakur Puja

It is the puja of the sun-god and sometimes it is called that this puja is of Shiva. It is celebrated in the month of *Baisakh*. It is the puja performed by the women. They do not eat fish, meat, or egg in the month of *Baisakh* and do not take any food on the day of celebration until it is completed. Throughout the month of Baisakh the women bathe every morning before the sun rises. This is called *Uchron*. The puja is performed on any Sunday, as it is considered to be the day of the sun. The votaries must also remain without food on the previous Sunday. The priest is an *Odhikary*. A goat preferably of white colour is brought to the spot; some vermilion is smeared on its horns. It is then offered to *Dhoram* Thakur and let off without killing. Ducks if offered are also similarly let off. Eggs, ripe plantains are also offered.

Durga Puja

The festival of Durga falls in the month of October or Ashwin in Hindu calendar. It is found that the Rajbanshis traditionally worshipped a goddess named Devi. The goddess, the Devi is similar to the goddess Durga. At present days, most of the Rajbanshis use the term Durga for Devi. During the festival, the Rajbanshi families worship many other gods and goddesses with Durga. They worship Kali, *Bishahari*, *Chaitanya*, *Nityananda*, *Biswakarma* etc. on the *BijayaDashami*. In this village not a single Rajbanshi family worships Durga making an idol of the goddess. They worship the goddess on the mud floor in a corner of their house. Special food items (i.e. *prasad*) with *Dhup* (i.e. incense stick) etc are required for the purpose. And in this connection an *Odhikari* is also called for. Another special occasion is performed on the day also. The Rajbanshis, whose parents were died, observe the occasion of *pindadan*. The Rajbanshis worship their dead parents through *pindadan* ceremony. The Rajbanshis believe that during the festival, the soul of the dead parents and grandparents come in earth and take departure after getting respect through *Pindadan*. They also believe that if they are not worshipped, they feel sad, and may cause unwanted results upon family. During the festival, some of the

Rajbanshis purchase new dresses and distribute the dresses among the near relatives. On the day of puja, nobody goes to another house, because all the families worship the goddess in the same day. But the children enjoy it by going house to house.

Ganga Puja

Belief on the goddess Ganga is very old. But the Rajbanshis did not worship the goddess by the name Ganga previously. Some of the Rajbanshis worshipped it as *Tistaburi* elsewhere. The Rajbanshis in this areas worship this goddess due to fear of land encroachment made by the Mechi River located very near to these villages. It is already mentioned that many families have migrated to this villages from some nearby villages due to land encroachment of the Mechi River. The Rajbanshis begin the worship of the goddess to get rid off from that type of natural calamity. The family members mainly the women worship it every evening. No idol is established in their houses. They worship it by offering a pair of *Dhup*(incense sticks). Besides this, the female worship it annually with festive mode at the last day of Chaitra month (i.e. April) in Hindu calendar. On the day some women making a group go to the Mechi River with some special food-items like banana, curd, sugar etc and flowers with a *Bhura* (i.e. a boat made with banana plants). They worship the goddess in the bank of the river and then sail the *Bhura* in the water of the Mechi River. Here the women and children of all communities take part in it.

Hanuman Puja

Worship of Hanuman is new to the Rajbanshis living in this village. Many Rajbanshis living in these villages worship it as god. They worship it as the king of monkeys. It is found that once upon a time, these areas were covered with jungles, forests. The forests, and jungles were the living place of several animals like monkey, snakes etc. Some animals were very fearful and dangerous for human life and property. Some of the animals entered into the houses and wasted the property and human beings also. It is already mentioned that the villages are located nearby to the Naxalbari forest. In this situation, the villagers began the worship of Hanuman. The village has no idol of the Hanuman made of mud ball. Some villagers keep the photos of Hanuman in their houses. They worship it at every evening when they worship other gods and goddesses in their houses. The females mainly worship it.

Hudum Deo Puja: Hudma

It is special puja .When there is protracted drought, the women in the village each with a sharp knife in hand, as a protection against '*bhuts*(ghosts), go in dark night, into a distant paddy field. They make a small image of the rain-god with plantain leaf stalk and install him on the field. As some places, a plantain tree is planted. Then the women stip off their clothes, untie the hair of the head allowing the hair to hang freely on the back. Thus being completely nude they dance and sing (mostly obscene songs) to abuse the rain god. Two women kneel on the ground like cows and draw a plough to scratch a few feet of the land and they spread some paddy seeds or plants or a few paddy seedlings. They then put on their cloths, tie the hair and come back. It is the general belief that rain invariably falls shortly after this puja is done. No men are allowed to go near the dancing place. If somebody ventures to go there, no one will abuse the women if they attack the man with

the daos (knives) they possess or even kill him. Presently this festival is rarely observed in this village.

Kali Puja

The Kali puja is common to all the villagers. The goddess Kali is worshipped by the Rajbanshis from very past. It is believed that the Kali is a goddess of energy. It provides individuals energy to fight against evil aspects and it saves them from any kind of evil aspects or it saves them from the attack of other unwanted incidences. It is already mentioned that there are three Kali temples located in these villages. The puja of the two temples are organized by villagers collectively and another one is organized by a Bengalese family individually. It is informed that the first two temples were founded by two Rajbanshi *jotedar* families and initially they maintained all the expenditures of the puja. They established these temples for the goddess to drive away the fear of ghosts, from the mind of the tenants or landless people who were used to work in the agricultural lands. But, presently the organization of the puja is not in the hands of the Rajbanshi families only. The villagers now manage the puja collectively. Here, the landowning Rajbanshi families have left their authority to others to organize the puja, due to lessening of the amount of their lands or the shifting of their houses from this village to other villages. During the Kali puja in the month of October, this goddess is worshipped by the villagers with great enthusiasm. A Brahman priest is called for the purpose. The puja is normally performed at night. The sacrifice of goats and pigeons is an important feature of the worship of the Kali. At the end of worship, *hospos* is distributed among the villagers. People of all castes, tribes come to enjoy the puja.

LokhiDak: GochorPana

This puja is held in the evening on the month of *Aswin* (Sept-Oct). This puja is held in the paddy field when the paddy is flowering and ears are opened. A small hut about three feet high is erected with jute sticks. Two small earthen balls are placed on the roof. The balls are then worshipped with milk and ripe plantain but without incantations. There is no priest. The owner (i.e. headman) of the field takes *khoil* (powder containing mustard cake) and *dzomura* (dried leaves of pumolo) in a small basket and lights a torch made at *sinja* (dried jute sticks) and then moves about in the paddy field holding up the burning torch and shouting the following- '*Sor-ha' Sogaredhantonamona, mordhanmothatsaul*'. It means if the paddy of other does not fruit properly; let me have in bomber crop. Most of the cultivators do this puja.

Laxmi Puja

Laxmi puja is common to all the communities living in the villages. They believe that the Laxmi is the goddess of wealth and prosperity. The Rajbanshis living elsewhere celebrate the festival by the name as *Lokhaidak*. The Rajbanshis of these villages say it as Laxmi puja. The worship of Laxmi is held few days after the festival of the Durga. In these villages, the goddess Laxmi is worshipped by two ways— firstly, the females worship the goddess every thursday in their houses. In this regard, no priest is required and nobody is invited for this purpose. Secondly, the goddess is worshipped in October or in the month of Ashwin in Hindu calendar, just few days after the festival of Durga puja. In this

connection, an Odhikari is called and the villagers of other castes, tribes, are invited. In these villages two Rajbanshi families observe this worship in this way. On the day of puja, the females worship the goddess after fasting whole day. At night after completing the worship, hospos is distributed among the people attended there.

Manosa Puja: ManosaPudza

This is a puja for the snake goddess. The puja is usually performed in the month of *Kartick*(Oct-Nov). An *Odhikary* is engaged for the puja. Milk and ripe plantains are the main items of the offering as it is believed that the snakes are very fond of those articles of food. Songs and dances in honour of the goddess are held and enjoyed. A special type of bamboo flute is played. This flute is called *mokhaormukhaBasi*. It has a separate wider mouth piece of bamboo called *Kupa*. It produces a moaning monotonous sound which is liked most by the snakes. This is the puja to save men from the attack of snakes. *Manosa* and *Bisahari* are synonymous. Beside this, *Manosa* or *Bisahari* is worshipped at the time of marriage of any member of a family.

MechiniKhela: BhedeiKheli

This puja starts from the first day of *Baisakh*. Though the term *khela* is used, it is essentially the puja of the goddess of the river *Tista* called "*TistaBuri*". It is said that the worship had its origin from the *Mech* who inhabited in this part of the country before the *Rajbanshis* settled in this area. The river *Tista* is held in high esteem by the local people and is as sacred as the *Ganga*. In the month of the *Baisakh*, when the snows of the hills melt and flow into the river *Tista*, the water becomes holy due to admixture with the water of the heaven. This is the time when the monsoon is about to start and the presiding deity of the *Tista*, must be propitiated to save the lands from disastrous floods. Only the women take part in this worship. On the first day of *Baisakh* the women take a bamboo basket, wrapping it in red cloth, place it on the crossing of a road under an open umbrella and worship the *TistaBuri* with flowers and vermilion without any incantation. The basket is then taken to the house of *Maroani*(the head of the party) and places it in the *Bastughar* or under the basil plant of the house. From the second day, the women move from house to house in a party with the bamboo basket holding an umbrella over it. They sing, dance and collect subscriptions. On the last day of the month they come to the side of a tank or river and perform the *TistaBuri* puja with the help of a priest. The priest is an *Odhikary* by *Rajbanshi* caste. After the worship the flowers are thrown into the water, the basket is washed and brought house for the next year. It is also mentioned that it is the worship to prevent an attack of small pox and so the goddess is placed on the first day on the crossing of road so that the evil spirit causing the disease cannot enter the village. This festival is very popular in this village. In *ChhotoDilsaramJote*, *RenukaSingha*, a 55 years old widow, acts as a *Maroani* (i.e. the head of the party).

NayaKhawa

On an auspicious day in the month of *Agrahayana*(Nov-Dec), some new paddy is husked and the new rice is boiled with milk and offered to the sacred basil, and then all the members of the house eat the new rice. An *Odhikary* is called to act as a priest for the

offering. He is also invited to dine. Beside these cows, birds, dogs are also fed with some respects.

PithaBechi Puja

PithaBechi is a new goddess of the Rajbanshis living in the villages. This goddess is worshipped in the month of February or *Falgun* in Hindu calendar. The goddess is introduced in the religious structure of the Rajbanshis by a Rajbanshi family living in Chhoto-DilsaramJote. In this village RenukaSingha, a widow acts as a *Maroani* (i.e. head worshipper) who keeps fasting on the day of worship. The goddess is worshipped to save the villagers from the suffering of *Kalajar* (i.e. Black fever) and from the encroachment of lands by the Mechi River. It is stated that the family had lands in a larger amount and some tenants also. Once when a portion of lands was under the encroachment of the *Mechi* River and the tenants were leaving the place then the widow began to worship the goddess. Afterwards gradually the encroachment lessened. From this time, the villagers believe on the goddess and they also began to worship. The goddess has no idol. Many gods and goddesses are worshipped under a Banyan tree. They put some stones and flags to represent the gods and goddesses. Though the worship of the goddess begun by a Rajbanshi family, but gradually it influences all the caste, tribes living in these villages, and some other nearby villages.

Roa Gara Puja or Gotsu Puna

In the first week of the month of *Jaistha* (May-June) the cultivators celebrate the first transplantation of paddy if there is sufficient rain for the purpose. Otherwise it is delayed. This ceremony is called *Roagara puja* or *gotsupuna puja* or *Maodhotir puja* (i.e. the puja of Mother Earth). The owner of the field carries a small plantain tree, five paddy seedling and some weeds to the sacred basil plant in the house. Some vermilion is sprinkled on the plants. They are then carried to the field. The five paddy seedlings are planted in the field. The plantain tree is sown in one corner of the plot and the weeds are thrown away with the prayer that they should spare the field from their ravages. Prayer is also offered to plantain tree to be on guard over the land. Then some milk and a few ripe plantains are thrown in the field for appeasement of the mother earth.

Shiva Ratri

The puja of *MahakalorMahadev* is performed throughout the month of *Magh* (Jan-Feb). The women bathe before the sun rises and abstain from meat, fish and eggs for the whole month. On the *shivaratri* day, *Mahadev* or Mahakal is worshipped through the whole night. Both men and women bathe four times at night and make offerings after each bath.

Beside the above important festivals and fairs, the Rajbanshis observe some other festivals with less importance. Some of these festivals are *Rath-yatra*, *Saraswati puja* etc. In this regard they do not arrange any worship in their house, but participate in those festivals organized in other places like schools, markets, etc. They also believe on those gods and goddesses. Even some of the Rajbanshi families observe the festivals of *RakhiBandhan*, *BijayDashami*, *Holi*, etc.

Concluding Observation

From the above discussion, it is observed that the religious practices of the Rajbanshis are involved with worshipping of various natural objects. They worship various plants and trees like banana trees, paddy plants, jute plants, basil plants, arun plants, mustardplantsetc, and on the other hand the Rajbanshis worship cows, birds, dogs, snakes, hanuman etc, and some other natural objects like Stone, Bamboo etc. These animals are very necessary to protect the biodiversity in any ecology. Again they worship rivers, by different names like *Tistaburi*, *Pithabechiburi*. They also worship the earth as a mother. They worship the earth to get good production. Finally it can be concluded that the religious practices of the Rajbanshis always favour the preservation and protection of different plants, animals, earth, and rivers which are essential steps for a healthy environment. The relation between the environment and the religious practices of the Rajbanshis is very positive and the religious practices of the Rajbanshis played and are playing a very much important role in bringing balance to the environment.

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